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AUTHOR Franke-Wikberg, Sigbrit
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ABSTRACT

The LONG project is a longitudinal study in progress at Umea University, Sweden, that is designed to assess the educational and professional beliefs of students in the fields of medicine, engineering, psychology, and economics. Beliefs concerning education may include free choice, the role of ability in success, and education as a motive for reward. Beliefs concerning vocational activity may include the role the student is to have vocationally and the best ways to put knowledge into practice. Pilot studies of the project have generated information based on students' recorded reflections about their fields of study; interviewing of students, teachers, and practitioners; and a literature review. Information gained from the pilot studies will be used to develop interview questions and structured situations for the main longitudinal survey to be undertaken beginning in the fall of 1978. Approximately 120 students will be contacted at least three times during their higher education studies. A cross-sectional survey of practitioners and teachers that parallels the main study is also planned. (SW)

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PROJECT TITLE: Long-term effects of higher education - a longitudinal study of the educational and professional beliefs of university students (the LONG project)

IN PROGRESS AT: Department of Education, Umeå University, S-901 87 Umeå. Phone 090/12 56 00

SCIENTIFIC LEADER: Professor Sten Henrysson

PROJECT LEADER: Dr. Sigbrit Franke-Wikberg

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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BACKGROUND

Evaluative educational research is often characterized by the officially expressed goals of education providing the immediate point of departure for evaluation or at least being taken for granted in empirical work. Attention, consequently, has above all focussed on educational effects designated as desired and/or anticipated effects on the strength of the goal documents.

Another characteristic of most of the evaluative research that has been done so far is that it focusses on short-term and relatively easily measurable educational effects via achievement tests and simple attitude measurements. As a result, educational effects which occur on a more long-term basis or which are more difficult to pinpoint have been overlooked. There is an urgent need for evaluative researchers to go one step further by attempting, despite the great problems of measuring technique that are involved, to capture long-term educational effects of this kind, which may be the most central effects of education.

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In the light of American research, for example, into questions concerning the influence of college studies on the attitudes and values of students (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Withey, 1971; etc.), qualitatively oriented research can be justifiably claimed to be necessary as a mean of acquiring further knowledge concerning the effects of higher studies on students. Not only has previous research been dominated by quantitative descriptions of educational effects, in terms of the student becoming more or less liberal, flexible, bound by morals etc., the descriptions have been framed in such general terms as to be devoid of content; this is shown by the above examples. Hence the qualitative oriented researcher has to be concerned with close analysis of the content of the educational effects.

Another observation which can be made and has been made concerning both general evaluative educational research and the host of American studies concerning the influence of college studies on students is the lack of theoretical foundation. The aim of understanding why certain effects occur and why they have certain properties demands the formulation of a theoretical frame of reference for the inquiry. (Also see Franke-Wikberg, 1977.)

The guidelines for the LONG project have been drawn up against this (briefly summarized) background. Our initial premise is that the education system has an ideological function in society. The LONG project focusses on a selection of overtly vocational courses of higher education. Thus participation in a certain course of education is presumed to generate specific beliefs in the individual. The development of such beliefs may be equated with the shaping of the individual in a vocational paradigm. It is presumed that the structural elements which can be identified in the organization and content of the courses of education will be manifested in the statements made by the students. The scope available for ideological conditioning is presumed to depend on the design of the courses of education and on the background of the individual student, i.e. the belief system already formed when he embarks on his higher education.

Whereas the student is aware of certain ideas which he develops during his post-secondary studies, there are others of which he is not conscious. Thus both expressed and implied beliefs may be present in the statements made by the students. We also assume, moreover, that the students' conceptions are not arbitrary. Even if they are neither intentional nor conscious, they are related functionally to education and vocational preparation. They are bound up with the student role of the individual, his future vocational role and his total social role.

Beliefs and conceptions in relation to a delimited field of phenomena, object or sphere of reality can be termed perspectives (e.g. Johansson, 1978). Perspective is presumed to decide both what the individual sees in the world around him and how he perceives it. Perspective consists of various

a priori assumptions concerning the nature of reality, and these assumptions are based on experience, knowledge and values. The student's perspective is presumed to undergo qualitative changes as a result of the new experience conferred by a certain course of higher education and the knowledge and values thus communicated. The aim of the LONG project is to shed light on changes of this kind.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the LONG project is to make a qualitative study of the stabilization and transformation of the students' beliefs concerning education and vocational activity in connection with their higher education.

Compared with previous plans, the purpose of the project has been narrowed down to an examination of beliefs concerning education and profession instead of beliefs of a more general nature. This change has been made because we have become convinced that the investigation will have even better results if we take as our point of departure the reality that is directly linked with the everyday life and immediate future of the student.

Our intention is to follow students from four vocational lines of higher education, viz medical studies, engineering, psychology and economics, for the duration of their higher studies. The ways in which the students think, discuss and argue can be related to the direction of their studies and can reveal qualitative differences in the beliefs of students following different lines of study. We presume that the ways in which the students talk and act about their education and future occupations and about problems connected with their own educational sectors and the other educational sectors covered by the LONG project will convey information concerning the perspectives which are shaped during higher studies. The question of the bonds between perspective and a particular course of education and an analysis of its nature is important. In addition, for example, to the emergence from students' statements of beliefs with a direct vocational relation which can reflect a greater or lesser degree of standardized thinking, we should also be able to arrive at fundamental beliefs concerning society, man and knowledge.

WORK SO FAR ACCOMPLISHED UNDER THE LONG PROJECT

Intensive planning work has been in progress since July 1977. A number of reports have been completed and empirical pilot studies have been completed or carried out. These various types of work have often proceeded parallel to one another. There has been close co-operation with the project "Higher studies and conception of the world at large. A study of educational effects", headed by Professor Ference

Marton and Dr. Lars Owe Dahlgren at the Department of Education in the University of Gothenburg. We have met on several occasions and have among other things discussed questions concerning the disposition of the projects and theoretical and methodological problems connected with our inquiries. Joint "post mortems" of various pilot interviews will serve to illustrate the practical co-operation occurring between us.

1. Beliefs (Vorstellungen) are an overriding concept employed in the LONG project. The beliefs of the individual are presumed to operate as a filter or matrix for the interpretation and valuation of the world around him. This concept can be related to the closely allied concepts of "habitus" (Bordieu-Passeron, Berner et al., 1977). Briefly, beliefs are characterized by being ideologically conditioned and therefore dependent on their wider social context. They are founded on systems of knowledge concerning the world at large, they are relatively durable but changeable, and they determine attitudes towards, views about and active preparedness in relation to the world at large (e.g. Franke-Wiberg & Olofsson, 1977).

2. Work has begun with the aim of outlining a theoretical frame of reference. In this connection a discussion is being conducted at macro level (social functions of education), at medium level (education/instruction characteristics) and at micro or individual level. A preliminary working paper has been completed (Franke-Wikberg et al., 1977). Ideas concerning closer study, development and integration of different fields in the working paper are intended to provide a foundation for further analysis. The theoretically based evaluation which we advocate is best described as a theory-generating approach, in contradistinction to the traiditional theory-confirming approach. The theoretical frame of reference we are trying to develop will in its first stage serve as a source of suggestions for the empirical work, pointing ahead to certain fields of interest. The intention is for the empirical side gradually to impart content to the frame of reference. The theoretical work and the empirical work are characterized by a give-and-take process.

Mention can be made here of some of the questions which, on the strength of the working paper, appear worth investigating in the LONG project. Beliefs concerning education include: free choice, the role of ability in success, education as a motive for reward. Beliefs concerning vocational activity include: the function which the student is to have in vocational life and the best way of utilizing the knowledge gained.

3. An attempt has been made to point out similarities and dissimilarities between the LONG project and the Gothenburg project mentioned above. One main difference is that the

Gothenburg study focusses on more specifically cognitive aspects while the LONG project, as has already been made clear, emphasizes a more ideological content. Another difference between the two projects can be expressed in terms of description as distinct from explanation. The Gothenburg study manifests interest in description but not in explanation. The LONG project is also aimed at presenting certain explanations for the outcomes which emerge, partly by relating them to characteristics of the course of studies concerned and to the background and a priori views of the students (Dahlgren & Franke-Wikberg, 1977).

4. A pilot study for the LONG project was carried out in the academic year 1976/77. During the autumn term, ten students kept a weekly account of their reflections concerning the course of studies they were following. Two students from each course of studies acted as rapporteurs. Intensive interviews of the students were carried out at the close of the academic year.

The pilot study showed that valuable information could be obtained using open methods of this kind. There is close agreement between the descriptions given by the students of the formal design of instruction. On the other hand the interpretations and assessments made are closely dependent on the student concerned. The cognitive view of the individual student is clearly manifested in the reports. Reports and interviews also convey information concerning the changes undergone by the students as a result of their studies. The outcomes, which may possibly express changing views concerning education and which may be worth taking into account in the LONG project, concern, for example, passivization and resignation in the light of the experience gained, the achievement of personal standpoints, the discovery of connections between elements of knowledge or the occurrence of confusion and chaos when it has not been possible to trace any such connection, a state of frustration due to the feeling of being unable to learn anything, and the risk of narrow-mindedness resulting from a particular kind of teaching. (Franke-Wikberg, 1978.)

5. Plans for two pilot studies are outlined in Franke-Wikberg & Henrysson (1977). The first pilot study, comprising open-ended interviews of students, teachers and practitioners in economics, medicine, psychology and engineering, has been completed. Altogether seventy interviews, each lasting on average for one hour, have been tape recorded. The second pilot study, a review of popular periodicals in the four sectors concerned, is not quite complete. Further remarks on the pilot studies will be found in point 6.

6. The interviews of students, teachers and practitioners focus on two fields: (A) the specific course of education and the profession, together with the effect of the education on conceptions and (B) problems in the sector which are both central and difficult. Clearly information can be extracted concerning both expressed and implied beliefs on the subject of education and professional activity. Field A is also intended to furnish better guidance concerning the courses of education under consideration, while the purpose of field B is to elicit a content which is both relevant and centrally important. Certain selected "problems" to which reference is made are intended to furnish a basis for structured situations and open-ended questions in the main study.

Work has begun on the analysis of the interviews. Among other things, a list has been made of the problem areas broached by the interview subjects. One trend is that third terms students indicate more wide-ranging problems while students in the final phase of their studies and, still more so, teachers and practitioners, indicate problems which are more limited and bound up with their own situation.

The following examples from an interview of a female student in the final term of her economics studies will serve to illustrate some aspects worth concentrating on in the main study. She describes a feeling of uncertainty which she says is typical of the majority of her fellow students as well. The reality within the walls of the university or college is found to be completely different from the reality outside. "Even if we know it on paper, we realize in our hearts that we do not really know the thing at all ... very many people will stay on here and read more subjects ... this feeling of uncertainty before we dare to take the plunge into the outside world".

She also expresses the passivizing effect of education on the students. ".. This business of student influence and all that sort of things - it doesn't exist really, I mean, there is nobody who wants to influence things. On the contrary, people are completely passive ... We are here to get an education. We're not here to think you might say."

It is interesting to note how she interprets different problems in such a way that she can be said to explain them in a perspective of business economics. She describes the solutions of many great problems in terms of company organization. Referring back to the research done by Perry (1970), describing the cognitive development of college students from black-and-white thinking to relativist thinking and, finally, to a mode of thought whereby the individual adopts a standpoint of his own and views that standpoint in relation to other views, the statements made in this interview bear witness to different forms of

thought depending on content. Describing the way in which she feels that she has changed during her studies, the interviewee expresses a relativist mode of thinking, while her remarks concerning the academic and professional situation of female economists bears witness to thinking at the third of Perry´s stages.

The aspects described above, such as uncertainty, passivization, the adoption of a subject perspective in the interpretation of reality and differences in modes of thinking, are not exactly the type of educational effect to be found in official goal documents for higher education.

The purpose of the review of popular journals of economics, medicine, psychology and engineering is essentially the same as was indicated for field B, above. A relevant foundation needs to be established on which to design the instruments which are to be used in the main study. The review of periodical publications will convey a picture of the problems which are under debate in the various sectors. A selection of periodicals from 1970 to 1977 inclusive will be scrutinized, and this will make it possible to describe the trend presented by their content.

CONTINUING WORK WITHIN THE LONG PROJECT

The above remarks concerning the work which has been accomplished so far also provide an indication of the tasks which will have to be performed in the immediate future. The interviews are to be analysed and results reported. The scrutiny of periodicals is to be concluded. Structured situations are to be constructed. The instruments to be used at the beginning of the autumn term 1978 are to be definitively designed and tested. Preliminary reports are to be revised. Contacts are to be established with the persons concerned within the four lines of education.

The longitudinal main survey, which is expected to involve up to 120 students (i.e. 30 from each of the four lines of study), will begin in the autumn term of 1978. All of the students will be contacted on at least three occasions during their higher studies for purposes of investigation. The same nucleus of interview questions and structured situations will occur on each occasion. In addition to this nucleus, questions concerning factual knowledge, for example, will be asked on one occasion.

The information obtained from interviews concerning the arrangement and content of the lines of education will be supplemented with a description of the same lines based on an historical analysis, on syllabus type documents and on particulars supplied by teachers and others.

While the project is in progress, it is also planned to carry out a cross-sectional survey of practitioners and teachers. The nucleus of questions and situations used in this survey will be same as in the main study. The survey will be intrinsically useful, but its main purpose will be to supply points of reference in relation to the results emerging from the survey of students.

Sigbrit Franke-Wikberg

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